

Etymology of 'volga'

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0. INTRODUCTION

The Volga river area in the northwest of Russia has been inhabited by different groups of people throughout the millennia. Finno-Ugric tribes were among the earliest to settle the region stretching from the Volga to the Oka River before the first millennium BCE. By the beginning of the first millennium BCE the Finno-Ugrians had come into contact with East Balts who spread out thinly beyond the upper reaches of the Volga and more heavily into the Volga-Oka interriver region. The next arrivals were the Slavs (chiefly the Krivichians) who began settling the upper reaches of the Volga in the eighth century CE. (Tret'jakov 1966: 286, 297) In the latter half of the eighth century CE Scandinavians extended their presence from Lake Ladoga as far south as the Volga-Oka interriver region along what would come to be known as the Baltic-Volgaic Route¹, an important route in the silver trade. (Nosov 1992: 103) By the advent of written records, the name of this important waterway had come to be 'Volga'.

0.1 DISPUTED ETYMOLOGY OF 'VOLGA'

As is often the case with the names of places inhabited by successive waves of people, the etymology of the name Volga is disputed. Most linguists point to four possible sources: Slavic *vĭlga 'moist, wet' (Vasmer 1986: vol. 1, 337), East Baltic *ilga 'long' (Gimbutas 1963: 33), Volga-Finnic *jŭly 'river' (Mikkola 1929: 27), and Baltic Finnic *valga 'white'. (Preobrazhenskij 1959:91) Although in general great care has been taken to show how, via certain sound changes, the name Volga derives from a given source, I found that most of the etymologies operate without sufficient consideration for

¹ I take responsibility for translating 'Baltijsko-volzhskij put' as 'The Baltic-Volgaic Route.'

the *chronology* of the sound changes or their *conditioning* environments. In two instances I noted a reliance on sporadic sound changes and unexpected reflexes.

0.2 AN APPROXIMATE CHRONOLOGY OF THE RELEVANT SLAVIC SOUND CHANGES AND HISTORICAL EVENTS

Prompted by these observations, I decided to test what has been put forth in each etymology against the known chronology of the sound changes and their conditioning environments. To this end I compiled an approximate chronology of 15 sound changes and historical events based chiefly on Shevelov (1964) and Tret'jakov (1966).

	<u>Sound Change/Historical Event</u>	<u>Approximate Date</u>
1.	Finno-Ugrians settle Volga region	Before 1 st millenium BCE
2.	Initial Baltic-Finnic contacts in Volga Region	By start of 1 st millenium BCE
3.	Merger of o>a<a	6 th -5 th century BCE
4.	Prothesis of <i>j</i> and <i>v</i>	1 st -5 th century CE
5.	First delabialization <i>jũ>jĩ</i>	6 th -7 th century CE
6.	Initial Slavic-Baltic Contacts	6 th -8 th century CE
7.	Initial Slavic-Finnic Contacts	7 th -8 th century CE
8.	Rise of Yers (CũC, CĩC preserved, where C=consonant, l=r, l)	Early 9 th century CE
9.	Merger of CũC/CĩC in the type CũC	Early 9 th to 10 th century CE
10.	Rise of <i>o</i> from Short <i>ǣ</i>	Middle of 9 th century CE
11.	Pleophony	mid-9 th century CE
12.	Dissolution of Slavic Linguistic Unity	mid-9 th century CE
13.	Svarabhakti	ca. Late 9 th century CE
14.	Second Pleophony	No sooner than 9 th century to before the loss of the Yers
15.	Loss of Yers	Mid-12 th -mid-13 th century CE

I will evaluate the four cited etymologies against these criteria using, when applicable, historical and archeological evidence that may be relevant. My purpose is neither to promote nor disprove a given etymology, but rather to evaluate the likelihood of what has been put forth.

1.0 ETYMOLOGY 1: SLAVIC *vĩlga

Vasmer believed that the origin of the name Volga could be determined from the presence of the word-internal tautosyllabic segment *-ol-*. (Vasmer 1986: vol.1 337) Because pleophony had resulted in the change ColC>ColoC (or CalC>CalaC which later becomes Coloc), the name Volga could not have originally contained the sequence *-ol-*. Its presence in the modern word indicates that just prior to pleophony, the name Volga

must have been *vǫlga (CǫlC>ColC). Furthermore, because the merger of CǫlC and CǫlC in the shape of CǫlC (where the initial consonant was not an alveopalatal fricative) was critically ordered in a feeding relationship with the change of CǫlC>ColC, Vasmer viewed it as possible to reconstruct the earlier stage *vǫlga.

1.1 INTERNAL EVIDENCE FOR SLAVIC *vǫlga

The internal reconstruction *vǫlga has supporting evidence from within Russian. If the *vǫlga etymology correct, then the most likely word root would be *vǫlg- (parsing the word otherwise would result in an altogether unknown Slavic root). This root *vǫlg- resembles the Old Russian word *vǫlg-zkz* 'humid, damp.' This root *vǫlg-* (which itself is reconstructed as *vǫlg-) is the undisputed zero grade of the word *vológa* (<pre-pleophonic *volga or *vǫlga) 'liquid fat used as a seasoning' and the Church Slavic borrowing *vlága* 'moisture, liquid' which assumed the original meaning of *vológa*.

A second derivational relationship which argues strongly in favor of the *vǫlga reconstruction is the term *vólozhka* 'arm of the Volga formed usually after a flood'. (Vasmer 1986: vol.1 337) Because the North Russian sound change of second pleophony resulted in the duplication of a yer vowel after the sonant when in tautosyllabic position (CǫlC>CǫlC), the etymology of *vólozhka* is believed to be the selfsame *vǫlg- (>*vǫlg->*vǫlǫg->volog-). The occurrence of the root volog- in *vólozhka* and in other North Russian words of the meaning 'moist' or 'liquid' suggests that the root of Volga could well be the Russian *vǫlga.

1.2 ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE FOR SLAVIC *vǫlga

Additional evidence for the Slavic *vǫlga etymology is found in Slavic and in Baltic. In Polish the cognate form of the zero-grade root *vǫlg- is *wilgi* 'damp'. In Lithuanian the cognate root is *vilg-* as in the word *vilgyti* 'to moisten'. The presence of these forms strongly suggests that the root *vǫlg- was indeed native to Slavic as well as Baltic.

1.3 THE VOLGA AS THE 'WET' RIVER?

If the Slavic root *vǫlg- is the correct etymology of Volga, then the name Volga means essentially 'the wet' or 'the moist' river. That the Volga is laden with water, more so than any other river in the northwest region of Russia (or in all of Europe for that matter) is beyond dispute. The Volga is fed by melting snow in the spring and considerable (though varying amounts of) rain in the summer. (Bol'shaja sovietskaja encyklopedija 1958: 604)

The question that arises is whether the Slavs would have named a river 'wet' or 'moist'. Dr. Daniel Collins has suggested (personal communication) that not far to the north of the Volga flows another major river, the Suhona, the etymology of which contains *suh-, the Slavic root meaning 'dry.' Like the Volga, the Suhona is an important waterway, but unlike the Volga, navigation is interrupted in the summer due to shallow

depths in certain areas. (BSE 1958: 333) Perhaps for this reason the river was named 'dry'. Consequently, if a river could be named 'dry' for its shallow levels in the summertime, it is not impossible that a river allowing for uninterrupted summertime navigation was named 'wet' (i.e., the Volga).

1.4 SLAVIC *vĭlga AND CHRONOLOGY AND CONDITIONING ENVIRONMENTS

Vasmer's etymology passes through two stages: the merger of CъlC and CĭlC in the form CъlC (*vĭlga>*vĕlga); and the yer shift (*vĕlga>Volga). His etymology is therefore wholly unproblematic as the two sound changes he employed were indeed ordered in a feeding relationship. The approximate dates of the first sound change involved, early 9th-10th century CE, accord with the growing Krivichian presence in the upper reaches of the Volga (eighth century CE and onward) and the subsequent Slavic expansion into the Volga-Oka interriver region. Therefore, it is very possible that as the Slavs settled the Volga river region, initially in areas only sparsely populated, they gave the river a Slavic name.

2.0 ETYMOLOGY 2: EAST BALTIC *ilga

Although the Slavic etymology seems compelling, some linguists argue that the name Volga must be of Baltic origin, because pockets of East Balts were known to have inhabited the upper reaches of the Volga, the very area that was later settled by the Krivichians. (Tret'jakov 1966: 286) According to this theory, *vĭlga is taken to be the correct etymology, but at a later stage. It is argued that the East Baltic word *ilg- 'long' was given to the river because of its enormous length. (Gimbutas 1963: 33) According to this theory, when Slavic settlers finally arrived in the upper reaches of the river and encountered Baltic elements there, they borrowed a Baltic name for the river as *ĭlga.

Proponents of the Baltic etymology then point to the well-known Slavic sound change of glide prothesis. Accordingly, it is argued that *ĭlga attracted the labial glide w- (which later became v-) for the form *vĭlga. From this point on *vĭlga passes through the stages outlined in the Slavic etymology: *vĭlga>*vĕlga and *vĕlga>Volga.

2.1 GLIDE PROTHESIS

Slavic and Baltic contacts took place in the northern region between the sixth and eighth centuries CE. (Tret'jakov 1966: 296) Glide prothesis in Slavic is believed to have taken place in four stages, the first (and for our purposes most applicable) of which occurred between the first and fifth centuries CE. (Shevelov 1964: 246) It was at this time that word-initial *i-* and *u-* attracted the glides *j-* and *w-* (>*v-*) respectively. Glide prothesis then continued in three subsequent stages over the next four hundred years, including the period of Slavic-Baltic contacts. (Shevelov 1964: 246) Nevertheless, the conditioning environments for all stages of prothesis can be summed up in the following manner: a front vowel (*i* or *e*) attracted the palatal glide *j-*, whereas a back vowel (*u* or *o*) attracted the labial glide *w-* (which later became *v-*). (Townsend and Janda 1996: 68)

Consequently, although the chronology of the Baltic etymology is possible (Slavic-Baltic contacts coincide with subsequent stages of glide prothesis), the choice of prothetic element (*ɪlga > *vɪlga) violates the conditioning environment for prothesis: *v*-prothesis before a front vowel is unknown in Slavic.² The expected result of glide prothesis would be *ɪlga > *jɪlga, and *jɪlga, not meeting the qualifications for the subsequent merger of ČȳC and ČȳC in the form of ČȳC, would have become *ɪlga. (Shevelov 1964: 467-8)

2.2 EAST BALTIC *ilga AND CHRONOLOGY AND CONDITIONING ENVIRONMENTS

The time frame for *ilga to have been borrowed (6th-8th centuries CE) presents no problem. But as I stated above, the Baltic etymology violates the known conditioning environment for glide prothesis. One alternative put forth by some linguists is that the Baltic root in question possessed a word-initial *j*- which was subsequently lost in Baltic languages. (Gimbutas 1963: 33) According to this etymology, the starting point would have been *jɪlga. This, however, raises an equally problematic question: how did the glide *v*- come to replace *j*-? If *jɪlga became *vɪlga by a spontaneous glide-switch, it may be the sole occurrence of such a sporadic change in Russian.

Dr. Daniel Collins (personal communication), while himself not espousing the Baltic etymology, suggested that some may argue for the change *ɪlga > *vɪlga followed by *v*-prothesis for the form *vūlga (>Volga). This possible 'way out' seems plausible at first glance, but it misses a crucial step. The argument starts from the premise that hard (velarized) *l* was responsible for the backing of *ɪ* to *ɤ*. The common textbook example is *vɪlkū 'wolf' > vɪlkъ. Bearing this in mind, it would follow that there exists the possibility for *ɪlga to have become *ɤlga prior to receiving a prothetic element. When prothesis did finally occur, it involved the expected labial glide *w*- (*wɤlga > *vɤlga).

As I stated above, this second alternative is also problematic. For it to work, prothesis and backing need to have been ordered in a feeding relationship. Backing of short *ɪ* took place during the ninth and tenth centuries CE, whereas glide prothesis was an ongoing process during the entire period of Slavic-Baltic contacts (sixth to eighth centuries CE). Since Slavs reached the Volga by the eighth century CE, it stands to reason that a Baltic name would have been borrowed at that time. Consequently, at least with regards to Slavic-Baltic contacts, the two sound changes involved were ordered in a counter-feeding relationship. This means that prothesis would have been instantiated (*ɪlga > *jɪlga) prior to the ninth century change of ČȳC > ČȳC. Unless some other explanation can be found to reconcile the etymology of *ilga to the conditioning environments for the changes it was a candidate for, its likelihood is significantly weakened.

² The glide *v*- did indeed occur before front vowels in Slavic, but for all such examples it can be demonstrated that the word-initial *v*- was etymologically present: Slavic *vɪdova 'widow' vs. Old Indic vidháva; Slavic *vɪlkū 'wolf' vs. Latv. vilks 'wolf', et al.

3.0 ETYMOLOGY 3: VOLGA-FINNIC *jŭly

Still other linguists feel that a Finnic source for the name Volga must exist inasmuch as the Finno-Ugrians had settled the region long before either the Balts or the Slavs. Mikkola sees in the Old Mari name for the Volga, *Jyly 'river', the possible origin of the name Volga. (Vasmer 1986: vol.1 337) He proposes that the name for the river was *jŭly in Volga-Finnic. As Slavs came into contact with Finno-Ugrians they borrowed the Finnic name mapping their short *ŭ* for the Finnic short *u* and a voiced velar stop *g* for the Volga-Finnic *γ* rendering the form *jŭlga.³ He then posits a "glide switch" *jŭlγa>*vŭlga. (Mikkola 1929: 127) From here on out *vŭlga follows the same development as put forth in the Slavic and Baltic etymologies, *vŭlga>*vŭlga> Volga.

3.1 A POSSIBLE GLIDE SWITCH?

As I noted above in the case of Baltic *jilga becoming *vīlga, such a glide switch would probably have been the only instance of this sporadic sound change. In the Baltic case, the switch was from the wholly acceptable Slavic sequence *ji- to *vi- without any strong motivation for it. In the Volga-Finnic case, however, the change involves modifying what had come to be an unacceptable sequence in Slavic *jŭ- to the more acceptable sequence vŭ-.

Mikkola offers an innovative explanation. Prior to Slavic-Finnic contacts (seventh to eighth centuries CE), Slavic had delabialized *ŭ* and fronted it to *ĩ* when it occurred immediately after an alveopalatal consonant. (Mikkola 1929: 127) That this delabialization had been completed prior to Slavic-Finnic contacts is demonstrated by the Common Slavic word *jŭga 'yoke.' Prior to Slavic-Finnic contacts, the short *ŭ* was delabialized and fronted rendering *jiŭga. It was borrowed into Finnish from the oblique cases (i.e. gen.sg. *ižese*) as *ies* (gen. *ikeen*). (Shevelov 1964: 267; Vasmer 1986: vol.2 115-6) Therefore, Mikkola was correct to point out that the sequence *jŭ-* would have become unnatural in Slavic just prior to the period of Slavic-Finnic contacts. (Mikkola 1929: 127)

The question that arises is how Slavic would have treated the foreign sequence #jŭ- after delabialization (and fronting) had removed the sequence from the native lexicon. Mikkola, of course, argues that Slavic would have replaced the glide *j-* with the labial glide for the acceptable sequence vŭ-. However, inasmuch as the change jŭ->jĩ- was phonetically motivated (*ŭ*, a back vowel, assimilated to the place of articulation of *j-* thereby fronting and delabializing to become *ĩ*), I feel that the expected development would have been for *jŭlga to become *jĩlga. My conclusion is supported by the North Russian borrowing *ikumálka* 'drive used for fastening traces to the fore-part of Saami sleds'. The word derives from Finnish *jukko* 'yoke' (itself of Scandinavian origin) and

³ Presumably the final -a would have been added by the Slavs by analogy to numerous other river names in the area that end in -a.

malka 'pole'.⁴ (Vasmer 1986: vol.2 126) In this borrowing we see that the Finnish word-initial *ju-* must have undergone the development **ju->*jĩ* and finally **jĩ-* became *i-* even *after* the sound change proper of delabialization had taken place.

3.2 VOLGA-FINNIC **jũly* AND CHRONOLOGY AND CONDITIONING ENVIRONMENTS

The etymology of the Volga-Finnic **jũly* involves a putative glide switch which would have occurred during the initial period of Slavic-Finnic contacts (eighth to ninth centuries ũ). Although the time frame for the etymology is unproblematic, the result of **vũlga* from **jũly* is unexpected unless a sporadic change is posited for this single occurrence. As demonstrated with *ikumalka*, a word with the sequence *#jũ-* could enter the language after delabialization had removed the sequence from native words. However, positing a glide switch rather than assimilation to the place of articulation presents an unnecessary complication (Occam's Razor). On this basis alone it would seem that the Volga-Finnic etymology **jũly* is unlikely.

4.0 ETYMOLOGY 4: BALTIC FINNIC **valga*

With the Slavic, Baltic, and Volga-Finnic etymologies aside, there remains the Baltic Finnic etymology of **valga* 'white'. The Russian scholar Preobrazhenskij is the most prominent of the supporters of this etymology. (Preobrazhenskij 1959: 91) Preobrazhenskij purports that the Baltic Finnic word *valkea* meaning 'white' was employed in naming the river. (Preobrazhenskij 1959:91) Schramm also sees in Volga the Finnic root *valg-* (Schramm 1973: 122) According to these scholars, the Finnic name was borrowed directly by the Slavs in the form of **valga*.

However, for this etymology to work, the form **valga* needs to have been borrowed *after* pleophony took place (mid-ninth century CE) but *prior* to the rise of *o* from short **ā* (also mid-ninth century CE). In this way **valga* would have become Volga. Because the window of opportunity for **valga* is so narrow (mid-ninth century), it is also possible that Volga passed through a stage of svarabhakti in the form **vol̥ga* during the late ninth century. If so, it would not have been until after the yer shift that **vol̥ga* would finally have reached its present form of Volga.

4.1 THE 'WHITE' RIVER?

One question that immediately arises is why the Volga would be called the 'white' river. This in and of itself is not problematic. There was a tendency among ancient cultures (the Finns, Slavs, and Balts included) to name geographical features in close proximity to each other in pairs of opposite colors. (Ludat 1953: 139) The color black was often applied to mark a northern geographical feature and white a western one. (Prištak 1954: 377) The Volga river stretches to the southwest from another river known

⁴ The lack of the reflex of pleophony in the word *malka* and the apparent reflex of a back yer in *iku* suggest that this word was borrowed no sooner than the late ninth century CE but no later than the mid-twelfth century.

to have a Finnic name, the Msta. The name of this river derives from the Finnish word *musta* 'black'. Therefore, there is no immediate difficulty with the Volga being named 'white' in context of the 'black' river.

4.2 CHALLENGES FACING THE BALTIC FINNIC ETYMOLOGY

Aside from the semantics of the name Volga, little else will prove unproblematic. Four challenges face this etymology: 1) the critical ordering of pleophony and the rise of *o* in a counter-feeding relationship; 2) the borrowing taking place in the mid-ninth century; 3) the proposition itself that a Baltic Finnic root is the source of the name Volga; and 4) the very shape of the root itself. Of these four concerns, two will prove particularly troublesome.

4.3 ORDERING OF PLEOPHONY AND RISE OF SHORT *o*

There is an abundance of evidence to place both pleophony and the rise of *o* in the mid-ninth century. (Shevelov 1964: 384, 416) However, there may be only one form that could be used to order them relative to each other in the area of Slavic-Finnic contacts. The Karelian word *tarboin* 'stick for stirring' was borrowed into North Russian dialects as the verb *torbat* 'to drive fish with sticks' and into Old Russian in *torobnaja lovlja* 'fishing with sticks.' (Shevelov 1964: 384; Vasmer 1986: vol.4 82) The Old Russian form shows the reflex of pleophony *torob-* which is inconclusive—whether pleophony came first (**tarb-* > **tarab-* > *torob-*), or the rise of *o* first (**tarb-* > **torb-* > *torob-*), or both of them simultaneously, the same form *torobnaja* results.

The North Russian form with the root *torb-*, however, might suggest that pleophony took place and was completed *prior* to the rise of short *o*. In this way the root *tarb-* would have escaped pleophony only to fall subject to the rise of *o*. Still another interpretation would be that the North Russian form *torbat* 'was reshaped from **torobat*' by analogy to the Karelian form *tarboin* which continued to be in use among Karelians in the region. Equally valid is the possibility that pleophony and the rise of short *o* were spreading concomitantly, but that in some speech communities pleophony took place before the rise of short *o* while in other communities, the opposite occurred. Consequently, it is not possible to determine conclusively whether one change preceded the other but only that, in the very least, both changes took place at more or less the same time. The example of *torbat* at least allows for the argument that, in the case of **volga*, pleophony could have come first.

4.4 A NINTH CENTURY BORROWING?

Slavic settlers established themselves in the upper-reaches of the Volga by the eighth century. (Nosov 1992: 102) By the latter half of the eighth century, the trade route known as the Baltic-Volgaic Route was in use not only for the transport of silver to Rus', but for the proliferation of Scandinavian influence. (Nosov 1992: 102, 103) The chief participants in trade with the Scandinavians (as well as conflict) were the Slavic Krivichians and Slovianians and the Finnic Merjas. (Nosov 1992: 102) The Baltic-

Volgaic Route connected the Neva, Volxov, Lake Il'men', Pola, Msta, the upper-Volga and the middle-Volga. (Nosov 1992: 102) Therefore, it stands to reason that the name for the Volga river would have become established by that time (eighth century CE). Consequently, to posit that *valga is the source of the name Volga obligates one to believe that Slavic speakers borrowed a Baltic Finnic name for the river decades into conducting international trade along it. Although not impossible, this scenario strikes me as rather unlikely. I find it more plausible that the name *valga would have been borrowed in the mid- or late eighth century, early into the establishment of the trade route.

4.5 THE LACK OF PLEOPHONY

If international trade being conducted from the Baltic Sea to the Volga river is grounds for assuming that the name Volga would have been borrowed by the latter part of the eighth century, then the immediate difficulty facing the Baltic Finnic etymology is its failure to show the reflex for pleophony (mid-ninth century). According to this sound change, the vowel *a* (or *o*) or *e* immediately preceding tautosyllabic *r* or *l* was duplicated after the sonant. Therefore, just as Slavic *galva: 'head' became Russian *golová*, and *vertena became *veretenó*, one would expect that *valga would have yielded *vologa. (Vasmer 1986: vol.1 337)

4.6 A BALTIC FINNIC NAME FOR THE VOLGA?

Perhaps a more critical issue facing the *valga etymology is the proposed root itself. That a Volga-Finnic name would be proposed as the source of the name Volga seems only natural. The question that arises is whether the Volga could have a *Baltic* Finnic name derived from the Finnish *valkea*. The Finnic peoples of the Volga region most likely to have had initial contact with the Slavs were the Merja, a people whose exact identity is unknown. (Tret'jakov 1966: 287) However, adjacent to the Merja lived the Baltic Finnic Veps. (Strumin'skij 1996: 272)

Since no records of the Merja language exist to establish whether they spoke a Volga-Finnic or Baltic Finnic language, any classification of the Merja language would be speculative. However, Bohdan Strumin'ski's analysis of Merja loanwords in Russian suggests that Merja had a decidedly Baltic Finnic affinity. (Strumin'skij 1996: 272-86) When placed into the context of the Merja's close proximity to the Baltic Finnic Veps, it does seem possible that the Merja were part of an early continuum linking Baltic Finnic with Volga-Finnic. (Strumin'skij 1996: 272)

If we then assume a Baltic Finnic presence along the northern Volga (possibly via the Merja), it would follow that a Baltic Finnic name could have been given to the river. As stated earlier, Preobrazhenskij proposes that Russian borrowed the root *valg- 'white' from Finnish *valkea*. (Preobrazhenskij 1959: 91) However, the Finnish adjectival ending *-ea* derives from an earlier *-eä*. (Institut Jazyka, Literatury i Istorii 1955: 115-6) It would then follow that the Baltic Finnic root in question would be not *valga but rather *valgeä, at least as far as Finnish is concerned. The comparative method can be

employed to help establish what the root for 'white' might have been in the Baltic Finnic languages of the region. I have included Mordvin and Mari, Volga-Finnic languages, inasmuch as any Baltic Finnic contingent in the region was likely part of a continuum with Volga-Finnic.

Finnish	valkea<*	walkeδa
Estonian	walge	
Livonian	va:lda	
Veps	vâuged	
Mordvin	valda	(Volga-Finnic)
Mari	valgede	(Volga-Finnic)

On the basis of these attested forms, it seems rather safe to conclude that the root in question would have been *valgVδa. Therefore, one would expect the name of the Volga to have been *Vologda, *Volgda, *Vologeda, or *Volgeda depending on when it was borrowed, that is, depending on whether pleophony preceded the rise of short *o* and whether a vowel separated the velar from the dental stop.

4.7 SUPPORTING EVIDENCE FOR THE *valgVδa RECONSTRUCTION

The possibility remains for Slavs to have truncated *valgeδa to *valga, or for the Finnic peoples to have done so themselves prior to the arrival of the Slavs. After all, the earliest attestations of Finnish already show the loss of *δ* (Itkonen, Joki, and Peltola 1975: vol.5 1620) However, evidence suggesting that *valgeδa or *valgVδa was in use in its full form during initial Slavic and Finnic contacts comes from the North Russian river Vologda. The name of this river was borrowed from the Baltic Finnic word for 'white' and it shows both *-d-* in the suffix and the expected reflex of pleophony (*-olo-*). This form casts serious doubt on the possibility of Volga deriving from the truncated form *valga.

Further supporting evidence is found in a Baltic Finnic toponym northwest of the Volga. Baltic Finns came into contact with the Komi-Permians in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE. (Savel'jeva 1992: 129) One of the toponyms attributed to Baltic Finnic peoples is the name of the right tributary of the Northern Dvina, the Vycheḡda.⁵ (Saval'jeva 1992: 129) Although the exact meaning of this river is unclear, its shape (*-gda*) recalls that of Vologda. One characteristic of Baltic Finnic adjectives bearing the suffix *-δa* is a preponderance for velar stems. (Institut Jazyka, Literatury i Istorii 1955:116) Vycheḡda shows both the *d* and the velar that are typical of a class of Baltic Finnic adjectives. Therefore, on the basis of Vologda and Vycheḡda it follows that if the

⁵ Room proposes that the etymology of Vycheḡda is the old Mansi *vich* 'damp meadow' and *jegda* 'river.' If so, that would not diminish from the fact that Slavs had no problem incorporating the foreign sequence *-gda* into their language at least so far as hydronyms are concerned.

name of the Volga did indeed derive from the Baltic Finnic word for white, *valga is not the correct reconstruction.⁶

4.8 BALTIC FINNIC *valga AND CHRONOLOGY AND CONDITIONING ENVIRONMENT

As with the Volga-Finnic etymology, it seems only logical that the name of Volga would go back to a Finnic source: Finno-Ugrians inhabited the Volga region long before the arrival of the Balts and the Slavs. Nevertheless, the *valga etymology falls short on two critical points: 1) it fails to demonstrate the reflex for an important sound change it was a clear candidate for (pleophony), because the name would likely have been borrowed well before pleophony took place. Furthermore, the comparative method raises serious doubts as to whether the proper root was reconstructed in the first place. For *valga to work, one must posit that Slavs borrowed the name decades into conducting important trade along the river and that, in this one instance, they trimmed *-eda* off of the Finnic name. Therefore I conclude that the Baltic Finnic etymology *valga is unlikely.

5.0 CONCLUSION

After examining the four most accepted etymologies put forth for the Volga (Slavic *vīlga, East Baltic *ilga, Volga-Finnic *jūly, and Baltic Finnic *valga) against the sound changes they involve, I find that only one etymology is likely: Slavic *vīlga 'wet' or 'moist.' This etymology shows the expected reflexes for the sound changes it was a candidate for and its meaning is understandable in terms of the favorable water levels present throughout the summer months. Furthermore, historical evidence may give a clue as to why this river was given a Slavic name--despite the heavy presence of Finno-Ugrians in the mid-Volga region and some pockets of Balts towards the northern reaches of the river, Slavs established large settlements in the rather unpopulated region of the river: the source.

The remaining etymologies violate the conditioning environments for the sound changes they require and/or fail to show reflexes for changes for which they were clear candidates. The lesson is clear: deriving etymologies requires a careful study of the facts in order to determine what is possible and what is not. Attention must be given to the chronology of the sound changes, their exact conditioning environments, and the history and archeology of the region if plausible conclusions are to be drawn.

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⁶ The truncated root *valk-* is found in several Finnish words: *valkaista* 'to bleach', *valkoinen* 'white', *valko-* 'white' in compound words, et al. However, I consider it risky to cite such forms as a source of the name of the Volga. To do so would be to posit that Slavs extracted the root *valko-* and disregarded the rest of the name in this one instance while clearly not in others.

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